

The Doors of Gay Self-Realization

DOUGLAS SADOWNICK

IT'S hard to believe, after all the semen that was spewed during the Sexual Revolution and all the deaths suffered during the health crisis of the 1980's, that the best visioning about sex that our community can accomplish is that of the "Just say no!" advocates and their adversaries, as epitomized in the exchange between Gabriel Rotello and Joshua Oppenheimer in the Spring Issue of *The Review*. Both are stuck in a concerted effort to destroy gay-centered psychological meaning and wisdom in their refusal to participate in the retrieval of the gay soul to the homosexual personality.

The soul here is a precise term used by gay-centered, Jungian depth psychology to name the felt source of life and meaning, to objectify this felt experience as a separate personality within, the prime mover and life breath inside ourselves that we experience when we fall romantically or erotically in love with another man. If anyone doubts that this archetypal soul-experience, this haunting masculine double, this buddy, this muscle stud, this dewy-eyed youth, this Marlboro Man, this sultry angel galvanizes gay life and seizes gay men with a special force and intensity, and quickens them into action, take a look at the cover of any gay magazine or overhear any locker room discussion at a gay gym.

Why has this homosexual soul been omitted from intellectual discussion? The answer lies in a toxic shame so marbled into our personal psychology that we take it for granted. To look inside, one would be immediately confronted with and awestruck by this horror.

No wonder social constructionists, who dominate academic discourse, refuse to make a solid place for emotions in their analysis. They fail miserably in dealing with the operatic dimensions of homosexual erotic love. That they have come to dominate our intellectual life is a measure of how primitive our understanding of the feeling self really is.

Psychoanalysis teaches us that intellectualization is a defense used by the ego, our conscious mind, to ward off overwhelming feelings from the rest of the psyche. The social constructionism and vulgar journalism that dominate our discourse act as defensive efforts to prevent us from facing these feelings. Gay people are so oppressed that they have come to hate their emotional essence, refuting the notion that homosexual instincts are the energy system of the gay mind. Of course, gay identity develops through a process of "construction," but that identity first springs from deep inner motives.

Noticing how prehistoric we are, however, may be the first step towards holistic change: resuscitating the homosexual soul and elucidating its psychology. True scientists do not disavow aspects of reality just because they're inconvenient (or because

they topple the ego's domination over the psyche). If gays are to forge new and amazing discoveries in our minds and address the dangers posed by both sides in the "sex panic debate," then we need to treat feelings as objective facts of psychic life, the raw data of inner experience, the way we come into our wholeness and potential. In their failure to address the complex feeling life of the gay individual or to go beyond the simple formulae, restraint or license, people like Michelangelo Signorile and Eric Rofes are neglecting the most crucial tool for ending the AIDS crisis and for moving gay liberation forward.

Rotello hopes that gay marriage will assist in lowering contact rates and create a more sustainable gay culture. Oppenheimer raises the question, how can true change take place through the adoption of a failed institution that's already assisting in the breakdown of contemporary social life? However, Oppenheimer, unlike Rotello, fails to provide a single proactive alternative to condom use as a means to stem the epidemic.

Focusing only on solutions that deal with the conscious life of the individual leaves out the place where our demonic impulses lie and fester, and where our best hope for true transformation can also be found, namely the gay unconscious. Like the heterosexual culture in which most of us were raised, gay male culture has become dangerously extroverted. All problems and solutions are thought to exist outside of us; we want more visibility, more circuit parties. To turn our attention inward would necessitate

that we face the emotional truth of our smashed gay selves and the elixir of redemption that can only be found through facing this devastation.

Like house slaves, we have become too much like our oppressors; we ravage our own feeling lives and collude with like-minded others who do the same through cocktail conversation and other kinds of disassociative behavior. No wonder our polite assimilation by day fosters a Special K barebacking event by night. The authentic psyche wishes to express itself. But punishing this "acting out" behavior can never alleviate the problem, which lies in the unconscious and can only be tackled through an appreciation of the hungry, devouring, and shamed places that we are seeking through getting turned on. We have become oblivious to the fact that eros, however it's manifested, leads us to become a partner with the soul, so that we can see the soul figure directly in the psyche, and not just outside of us. But by being antagonistic to sexuality, we become enemies to the primordial forms of truth found in eros. Gay men wish an ongoing relationship to the soul figure. We cannot internalize this soul-stuff without first facing our shame. Our sexuality is there to help in this process of differentiation—this is its secret intelligence—and its magnetic pull won't go away. We need to tease the shame apart from the soul through honoring desire, not by

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Douglas Sadownick's writings include a novel, Sacred Lips of the Bronx (1994) and a nonfiction treatise, Sex Between Men (1996).

adding to the homophobic darkness in which they are continuously enveloped. But no one—not Rotello, not Rofes—encourages an objective relationship to the symbol of transformation: the masculine soul figure.

The Gay Personality and Its Discontents

A new model of gay liberation and AIDS intervention describes the growth of the gay personality from an intrapsychic perspective, one that encourages an ongoing and conscious encounter with the unconscious. This emergent dialogue and process between ego and archetype reveals a magnificent world, one infinitely more vast and magical than the one outside. But it is first experienced through conscious suffering, through an initiation, a humbling acquaintance with one's neglected, shamed, hurt, enraged, and suffering gay child, fueled by the driving force of homosexual libido.

Working with feelings is a new way to become attuned to the magical and dynamic underworld journey romantic-erotic love takes us on—that is, if we accept the cycle of descent-resurrection-new consciousness inherent in the myth of romance. We can start the opus of individuation—realization by naming feelings, assigning an image to them, dialoguing with that image, coming at feelings from every imaginable angle—setting limits on them, amplifying them, embodying them, screaming at them, soothing them. This remarkably simple technique offers a nuclear explosion, a powder keg, a noisy outburst to and within the gay personality and ultimately to the society we're meant to benefit: a new theory and practice of gay liberation.

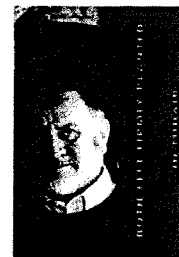
There is a reason why most of us don't live this way. Nothing is more difficult to do than to face and integrate one's childhood agony. Also, it is overwhelming to face the free-flowing channel of love that the haunting of the soul-image provides through this process of opening up to feelings. After eight years of working in this way as a gay-centering man, during which I gained my voice and found a certain lost humanity, and wrote my two books, I experienced a serious demon that was unleashed in me and took me down. Like the Fool in the Tarot deck, I could not easily tolerate the violence against the gay mind I saw being perpetrated by the gay people I loved. But when I began to speak out about suicidal ways of life on a handful of occasions, I was ridiculed by my gay peers, who didn't want to hear what I had to say about so-called mental colonialism. I was thus forced to face the shame and humiliation of that public outcry. The floor dropped out from under me. I re-experienced every scream my father shouted at me, but worse, every failure in holding in my pre-linguistic body from my mother. I felt worthless, depressed, overwhelmed, psychotic, and dead—and experienced what alchemy calls the "nigredo." The seeds of my emerging gay self were locked in this horror, and it was facing this horror that unlocked my heart. It was so hard to face that I almost abandoned the process and believed what my former friends said about me. Only by partnering this putrefying blackness—I did not fight it but did not give into it—only by bearing witness to this sickening drowning, this perverse loss of all meaning, this utter shame as consciously as possible, did I feel redeemed. As surely as day follows night, and as surely as the lost son is reunited with a good mother, a harmonious feeling of love was constellated in me in a marriage of the opposites of spirit and matter, divine and profane, light and dark. I no longer felt alone inside myself, dependent on the approval of others. The psyche had initiated me,

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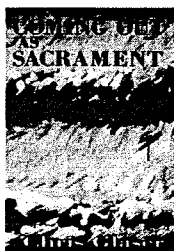
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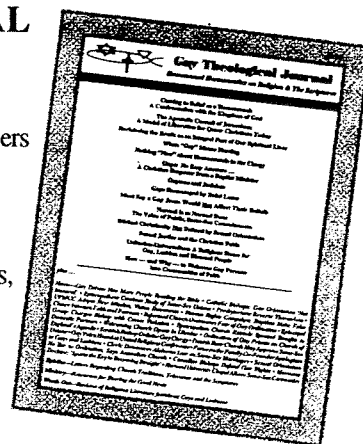
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as it does every person, and every gay man.

The question is, do we partner the descent—and our people have been through a most horrific one—or do we continue to try to escape from focusing our minds on it? Without a myth of meaning to help us make sense out of our loss and rejection, we are left to be slaves of a culture that hates us. We must either, like Signorile and Rotello, create rules and blame core group behavior, lobby to close down the few places men can go to find their eros, or we must insist, like Rofes and Oppenheimer, that there's nothing wrong with gay men acting out their need for meaning through doing violence to their physical selves. This is not to suggest that casual sex is wrong. A third position is to see gay sexuality as containing a wisdom and a system that can help us chart a loving, initiatory, and indigenous gay social life.

During his states of yearning and arousal, a gay-centering man would see that his feelings spring from an autonomous and profound source inside himself—that they happen to him and, like an erection or a dream, are not “willed” by the conscious personality, the part of the mind we call “I.” As he begins to name and know his feelings, a gay man is developing an ego-self relationship in which the thinking “I” initiates an intimate partnership with his autonomous feeling life and its multifaceted images and associations, and thus “sees” that there are other sub-personalities in his unconscious each with a will of its own. This initiates what is called an ego-self relationship. In Jungian terms the “self” is both the center and organizing principle of the mind—is thus different and greater than the soul and the ego—and is often represented by pictures of mandalas. One can see our subpersonalities as fragments of this “self” needing to be consciously integrated; if we don't do this work in our lifetimes, it just doesn't get done. This is why some Jungians suggest that humanity has not yet entered history, that unless we know the chaos in our own minds, we are pre-historic. Of great significance in this process of integration are two profoundly important such complexes: the gay shadow and the gay soul figure.

Our sexual history has offered a crucible for the process of individuation, which is a coming-to-know of these complexes during which all the split-off parts of the self are reunited. Individuation, like alchemy, is considered an *opus contra naturum*; it is said to go against nature in that nature is turning its attention upon itself. Gays have been accused, like the alchemists, of being against nature, too. Herein lies a positive spin to this centrifuge: perhaps gays represent a new invigoration to the process of human evolution by which people become conscious that they have an unconscious, that the unconscious has contents, and that these contents need to be taken seriously.

Plato says that same-sex love creates “children of the mind” rather than biological children. The shadow and the soul are just such children. It is a stiff challenge for gays to go and uncover their shadow side, given the struggle to maintain a gay-conscious identity in a homophobic world. But fate and history seem to be demanding something more from us than sexual acting out or punitive finger wagging. When the gay-centering man can loosen the bonds of repression and homophobia that lock him up in an unconscious addiction to an internally demonized world, he can attain freedom and enter a gay-centered—i.e., a loving—new world.

This was always what gay liberationists had in mind. Sex and romance were always linked to social change. Like a naïve hero,

the gay male liberationist sought his new lover, night after night, in a revolutionary slap to middle-class morality. But he made a terrible mistake in thinking that this lover existed entirely outside of himself. The love object sought in the outer world was actually a projection whose source was located within. His radical, political vision could not go forward unless he saw that all reality had a deeply subjective component to it. He could not yet see where he had also internalized his most hated enemy, and where it was mixed up with his soul-figure, and thus he was constrained to act out this internalized homophobe in the pursuit of love and pleasure.

The failure to recollect these projections in any “sustainable” way and to build a home for the gay soul complex points to a serious block in the individual's feeling capacity. This block is none other than the demon of internalized homophobia and its toxic shame, a place inside the gay mind that literally loathes homosexual love and its archetypal promise, and is addicted to a life of violently making sure that there can be nothing but compromise formations, such as sexual promiscuity or an equally airless domesticity.

This shadow could never have been discovered and objectified had not the gay hero been courageous enough to fight the police at Stonewall and create the world of the bars and the bathhouses at which anti-sex repression could be challenged. Jung says that whatever is unconscious in the mind is projected: we know our own minds through the way in which we start to “see” and scapegoat others. Often we saw our internal saboteur or victim on the face of the bathhouse older man we came to pity. This was our own as yet un-integrated shadow. And yet, we've been so worried about looking pathological to the community that we have failed to see that there is something pathological in each person. Everyone has an inferior shadow side. The civilizing process in any culture deems certain characteristics of each personality unacceptable during childhood and these get repressed in the dungeon of the mind. The ego projects this monster—this psychotic part of the personality that we see chasing us in our dreams—on “subhuman” others rather than see the Frankenstein as being its own brother. So far humanity has remained deeply ignorant of this personal shadow and has acted it out through projection and scapegoating. Gays have thus been loaded down with two kinds of shadows: their own and that of the heterosexual majority.

This shadow is so oppressive in gay life that it can no longer be ignored. Heterosexual Jungians have watered down individuation, frightened both of eros and of the shadow. Our obvious job is to reinvigorate individuation; our sexuality is a great engine of change and combustion! This has massive healing implications, not just for us, but for society at large. Feelings of hurt, rage, and shame are only evil when they remain disavowed; if rejected feelings are given love, and if limits are set on their hysterical effort to steal energy from the individual, love accrues to the personality in a profoundly transformative way. Working with these “crazy” feelings in a conscious and consistent manner is the only thing that can truly and ultimately heal us and move us into a more evolved and transcendental state.

After ten years of the social constructionist monopoly over intellectual discourse among gays—according to which society, power, and language now rule over nature—the psyche isn't going away. Gay people still have dark feelings and uncanny intuitions; they still are seized by passions; they still do rather stu-

pid things (barebacking, for one). Something other than the conscious will compels them to break the rules against their better judgment.

In fact, rules only exacerbate the problem of dealing with the unconscious. I have a repressed client who knows full well that unsafe sex will expose him to HIV. But he associates that rule with a punitive superego whose unrelenting bashing makes him feel worthless and helpless. One way of taking revenge on this superego—which contains his internalized alcoholic father, who humiliated him for being gay—is for him to have unsafe sex. This suffering child isn't punishing the man himself but rather his internalized father. So the more you wag your finger at this man, the more his inferior shadow will associate you with his father, and the more his shadow will do the very thing you're telling him not to do. Consciously, he knows better, but something inside has stolen his will.

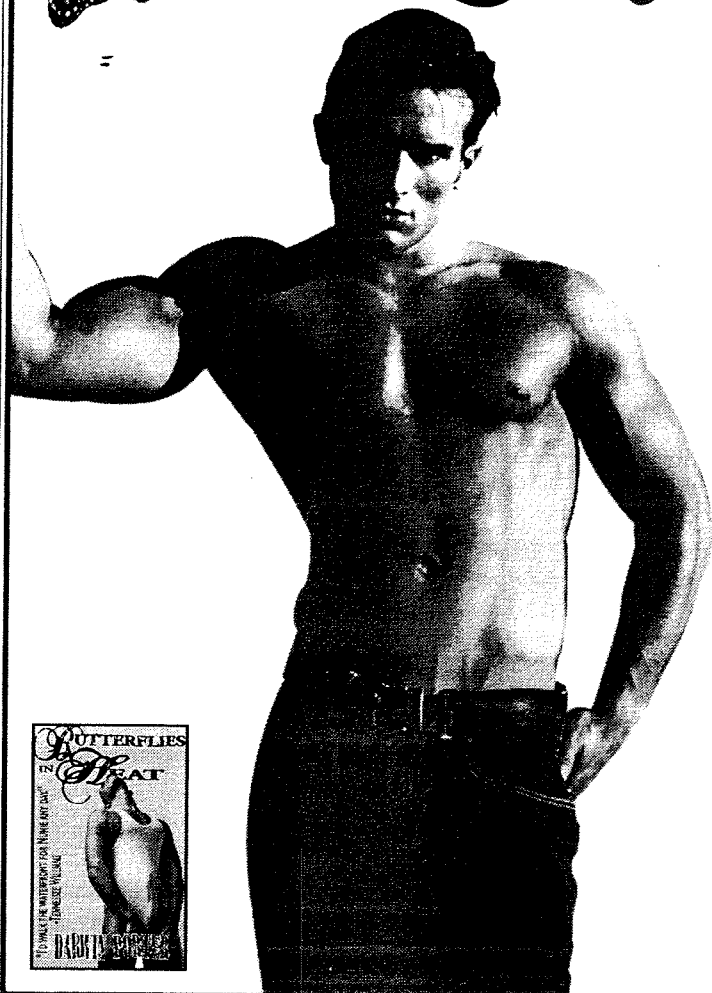
Here his shadow is really containing two undifferentiated and thus terrible complexes: his inferior child self and his punishing father complex. There is only one way to deal with the father complex and that is to engage him directly and set some firm limits on this sadist. There's a technique—called active imagination—for listening to and intervening on these poisonously punitive voices, a technique whereby the ego communicates with a subpersonality to find out what its meaning and purpose are. If the father complex reveals that it wishes the son dead, a gay man can set limits on his bashing father complex and he can also murder it on a regular basis. If a gay man does not come to terms with this inner anti-gay bully, "daddy dearest" will vanquish the person.

There's another reason to engage the gay male father complex—consciously, namely because within it lurks the archetypal father of *phallos protos*. In a way we have two fathers: a biological one and a more loving and transpersonal *patrix* of the unconscious. A gay boy, born gay, projects this archetypal force onto his father and, during the Oedipal stage of development, falls in love with and desires to marry his heterosexual dad. Because we live in a homophobic culture, the heterosexual father withdraws from the gay boy or even renounces him. This produces a complex in which the self-hating gay man is punishing and rejecting to the men he wishes to love, as well as to the man himself.

There is another problem within the shadow that ought to concern us as well. Psychoanalysis these days is more concerned with failures in maternal nurturing than its paternal counterpart, and many people do suffer low self-esteem from a lack of empathic holding from a mother who used them as a substitute parent to fill her own vacancies. This form of exploitation tells the child that his own love is worthless, and it's a more insidious and primitive problem than anything caused by the father. It manifests itself in the plethora of narcissistic and borderline character disorders in gay men, and in the attendant acting out behaviors, such as sexual compulsion, that we see in our community. The inability to internalize a so-called "good-enough mother" keeps us incestuously tied to the biological mother, and accounts for the ways in which we use sex as a substitute mother: for example, when we cling to a sexual partner we are often experiencing an excessive hunger for oral gratification during infancy. In psychoanalytic terms, this means that there are problems in the structure of the self, which results in failures of self-soothing, a compulsive need for mirroring, and a hunger for a primitive reassurance that one is a decent person. One way of trying to defend

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this orphaned self from constant fragmentation is to go for substances or compulsive sex.

It shouldn't be so difficult to name and work with these sub-personalities. Science has done wonders in creating categories for outer reality—we have categories for plants, diseases, solar systems, etc.—but science is still backwards in doing the same for inner reality. The only time we turn objectively to the psyche is when a problem taps us on the shoulder, and we're like Jacob wrestling with the Angel. For gay men, this angel has come in the form of our current crisis of meaning and identity. Our tendency to think in social terms rather than internal terms has loaded this angel with destructive energy. Taking up the burden of the psyche will be no easy task. Although individuation has massive social and political implications, it cannot be done collectively. An individual must face his devastation on his own, and this will challenge him to his core. Although his community can offer support, it cannot take away his pain, even though he will try to join with anyone who codependently tries to do so. This is why individuation entails a new definition of friendship and romance, characterized by psychological authenticity, in which poking takes the place of back-scratching and holding takes the place of bitching.

Eros and Transformation

How can a "soul psychology" offer a more transformational and more loving way of life? How can it transform the way we have sex and make love—or rather, how can sexuality be harnessed as a helper in the process of individuation? These are important questions with serious implications for ending the health crisis.

The place to start the journey of individuation is exactly where most gay men find themselves now. Simply put, psyche speaks the language of the soul when a gay man is turned on by another man. That experience can take place when we are in the presence of a hot guy or when we're fantasizing about one. We feel inside ourselves the "invisible breath body," as Jung calls it, the "life force," an "inspired enthusiasm." At this point, a gay man enters into the realm of the symbolic. Whether we see the "soul image" in the form of a muscle stud or a young boy or a older man, it is this feeling inside ourselves that must be once and for all integrated and owned, for it is a "spiritual entity" inside of us, not an outside person, that guides and directs the libido.

Never is the man to whom we are attracted, then, just a man. He is receiving a hundred projections of mother, father, inferior child, and soul figure, and is never actually known objectively as such. We can approximate some objective knowledge of him only once we realize that there are parts of our own psyche that are being aimed at him. Knowledge here is radically subjective and deeply symbolic; to think differently is to persist in an erasure of inner experience as well as an erasure of the outer lover, who is not seen for the whole person, and the fragile person that he really is.

All of the images of this masculine beauty that adorn gay life—from White Party posters to Calvin Klein ads—should tell us that we live more symbolically, more in rapport with the unconscious, than we dare to think. Capitalism merely exploits and contaminates an already existing call to worship; it does not create that psychical call. But because gays have failed to tease out the shame from the soul figure and to own this complex psychologically, because we still hate our psychic fathers and cannot bear to live with our incestuous masculinity in any real, feel-

ing way, the soul image can easily be disowned and bartered. The acting out behavior that so characterizes modern gay life demonstrates a love-hate relationship for the soul, contaminated, as it were, by shame.

A community of gay men who are actively interested in helping each other to see each other's homophobic violence while also honoring and valuing what is transpersonal in homosexual romance is absolutely needed if we are to save our spiritual and bodily lives. Gay romantic and erotic love should be concerned with developing a practical relationship to the homosexual erotic soul figure through an ongoing partnership and integration of the gay shadow side. Along with existing intervention strategies employed to contain the spread of HIV, the methods of gay-centered analytic psychology ought to be applied in individual and group settings. This would concern the development of gay individuation symbolism—images and myths of gay-centered heroism, being, union, love, and becoming—and settings in which gay men can come to know their repressed dark side and separate it out from the soul-figure.

The community's confrontation with death touches the deepest chord, and unless we respond to the call from that self and see it as the instinct towards gay male individuation, we will persist in a massive resistance and denial of the unconscious. A new kind of lovemaking will emerge from a conscious relationship to feelings, a new vision that will join the heart to the crotch. And while nay-sayers will argue that the approach of gay male individuation is too slow and that most gay men are too repressed to accept it, it behooves us at least to entertain the notion that the instinct towards individuation is speaking its language through our efforts to create consciousness and community. My own experience is that gay men are hungry to be held by someone who knows his worst demonic places and can see and help contain the equivalent places in the beloved, and that this approach will be perceived as manna in the desert by men who know that strategies like gay marriage or gay promiscuity fall short of what we need.

A critical discourse aimed at exploring the mysterious power of homosexual love is needed to shift gay life from its current drive towards superficiality to the creation of a gay consciousness. Neither monogamy nor one-night stands will satisfy a man who's trying to find and own his erotic soul figure through relationship to another man. First, he will be too turned off by the invisible violence and homophobia lurking in his lover's shadow and will seek to know this demon before getting too naked with the beloved. It would be repulsive to any truly conscious man to get fucked by someone who does not yet know his internal homophobe. Second, a gay individuating man will want to find brothers who can assist him in the difficult process of integrating his own shadow side, one who could hold him and hum to him and who visits his hurt and pain, helping him to grow up from being his parents' child into a gay hero. Activities that previously helped defend the gay adept against his inwardly felt subjective reality will be experienced as flights from truth and thus not so compulsively intoxicating as before. Homosexual self-realization will be revealed as cosmic, eternal, nutritious, and so utterly sensual and compelling that it will blow everyone's fuses and make them healthily addicted to romantic and erotic love as a path towards gay gnosis, rather than its less fulfilling surrogates, whether codependent coupling or promiscuous forays with strangers.